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Reviewing an inclusive intern partnership scheme: a black, Asian and minority ethnic student perspective

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Introduction

Within the United Kingdom (UK), widening participation (WP) is a well-established component of the government's political strategy for addressing inequality of access to higher education (HE) for under-represented student groups. The drive has achieved relative success in recent decades, as evidenced by steady growth in numbers entering HE from non-traditional and under-represented backgrounds, including those from low-income households, first-generation university students, care-experienced students and those from black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds as well as those with specific characteristics, including – but not exclusively – students with disabilities, mature students and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning students (Connell-Smith and Hubble, 2018; Younger *et al.*, 2018). Institutions across the sector are now fully committed to WP and fair access and, for many, this plays a leading role in their student recruitment activities. Whilst changes in both policy and practice are welcome, there remains a participation deficit of 29.9% between the most- and least-represented groups and a gap of 22.1% in degree classification outcomes (first-class or upper-second) between white and black students (Office for Students, 2018). Emphasis on addressing inequality at all stages of the student journey is therefore required to close the participation and outcomes gap, particularly for students from a BAME background, whose access, experience and outcomes of university education are much worse than those of the general student population (Universities UK, 2019).

Organisational context

This case study was conducted at Northumbria University (NU), a post-92 English university formed in 1969 and granted university status in 1992. Its origins were rooted in the need to provide practical and vocational education – still a core feature of the university's present provision, with accreditation from over thirty professional bodies. The institution is renowned for teaching excellence and ensuring fair access is a key objective, underlined in its Access and Participation Plan (Office for Students, 2018). In comparison to other HE institutions across the UK, NU traditionally recruits a higher proportion of white students, although in recent years there has been increasing diversity in the student population. The gap in continuation, success and progression rates at NU between white students and those from other minority ethnic backgrounds has narrowed since 2015, which may be partly explained by increased emphasis on and investment in addressing educational inequality within the university. Indeed, a range of activities has been implemented and expanded, including outreach activities aimed at increasing representation and support schemes for university students. One such example is the student internship scheme outlined in this case study.

What is the NU internship scheme and why was it developed?

This case study focuses on one target of NU's 2020-2025 Access and Participation Plan: to improve access, participation and graduate outcomes for BAME students. In April 2020, NU

established the 'Student Inclusion Team' (SIT) whose main strategic objective was to improve the success of under-represented students in the institution – a broad remit that supported the institution's ambition to improve access and participation for under-represented students as well as its equality, diversity and inclusion policy and practice. In partnership with the NU Graduate Futures Team, the SIT established a student intern scheme, with the main aim of supporting NU students from under-represented backgrounds and with low levels of relevant work experience to engage in paid employment. The scheme was developed as a partnership opportunity for NU students from under-represented backgrounds – including BAME, first-generation and care-experienced – as well as those with specific characteristics – including students with disabilities, mature students and those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning.

In conducting the work, the students involved not only gained vital employability skills but were also able to contribute to future policy and practice at NU. That funds were available to pay the students appointed helped to overcome financial barriers to engagement – and our target group may well be more likely to face these (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018); the funds certainly served to demonstrate the value that the SIT placed on the *partnership* aspect of the internship scheme (Healy, Flint and Harrison, 2014).

Implementation of the Student Internship Scheme

Working closely in partnership with the SIT, each student intern was responsible for exploring lived experiences and any key barriers that each student group faced. By means of a strategic application of Bovill and Bulley's (2011) ladder of student engagement to the internships (maximum of 130 hours), interns were able to begin their engagement at the point of the ladder they felt comfortable with, while being supported and encouraged to increase their 'active participation'; it was hoped that they would complete the internship closer to the top segment: 'students in control'. Unfortunately, although the interns were recruited in early March 2020, both they and the SIT had to adapt quickly to delivering the internships online because of the COVID-19 pandemic; the interns had, therefore, limited opportunities to 'climb the ladder' (Bovill and Bulley, 2011).

This case study provides insight into the findings of one intern's work, which focuses on exploring the nuanced experiences that people of colour face in terms of access and participation in university. (The student intern, from personal choice, will be referred to from here as 'the SI'). As a self-identified BAME student, the SI selected this issue, having previously faced some of the challenges associated with getting into and through university and, on the basis of this personal experience, aimed to make a difference for other BAME students. With the aim of sharing good practice identified within the university and the wider HE sector, the SI conducted localised research over a six-month period in 2020, exploring 1) any challenges or barriers that NU BAME students currently face, 2) what support they feel is needed during their university experience and 3) why it should be prioritised.

Theoretical framework

Drawing on the work of Crenshaw (1991), findings are presented through the theoretical lens of intersectionality. Crenshaw's body of work has illustrated the various ways in which race and gender have interacted to affect the experiences of women of colour. In this study, the framework helps to explore how experiences of discrimination and social inequality can be

distorted when the focus is on a single issue or category (in this case, being a BAME student); the framework instead suggests that emphasis must be placed on analysis of multiple, fluid and dynamic social categories that combine to produce inequality (Pheonix, 2016).

Method

Situated within the interpretivist paradigm and adopting a post-positive stance, narrative research recognises that knowledge is not absolute, but instead is relative and subjectively created; it is also dynamic, evolving and transient in nature (Patton, 2015). The approach used in this case study draws on the work of Riessman (2008) and Squire (2013), whereby personal experience-centred narratives were invited through a virtual individual interview and supported by a written reflective account produced by the SI. This placed emphasis on the SI's being, as narrator, the focus of the study, with the space to share personal experience. When undertaking qualitative research, it is important that the interviewer quickly builds trust and rapport with the interviewee, so that the latter feels confident, reassured and relaxed, able to discuss such topics as are felt to be appropriate (Squire, 2013). The third author undertook the role of interviewer, encouraging the SI to discuss openly unique personal experiences by means of a series of open-ended questions and then returning to these to invite further exploration, consistent with the narrative approach to interviewing (Roller and Lavrakos, 2015; Allen, 2017). Examples of the questions are:

- Can you provide an overview of your experience in the intern role?
- How do you feel your role and work contributed to the student experience?
- Based on your experience, what needs to be done next?

The interview was audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and, alongside the reflective account, subjected to thematic analysis (Riessman, *op.cit.*). Transcripts were read numerous times by the first, second and third authors, who made marginal notes reflecting theme statements and their meanings. The same authors then independently annotated each interview transcript with their personalised thoughts and interpretations of the data. Initial thematic coding employed a deductive approach as recommended for qualitative analysis when existing theories are being tested (Riessman, *op.cit.*).

Findings from the SI's internship work

The findings from the SI's work focus heavily on the central themes of belonging, identity, racism and financial difficulties.

Belonging

Lack of diversity and the university culture were thought to create several barriers for BAME students, particularly in relation to the sense of belonging to the university community. The following extract highlights how this had a significant impact on making students feel disengaged:

“the university do not support or welcome BAME students, which is connected to their sense of belonging”

Lack of representation is a historic feature of the UK HE system, which has been situated within a white, Eurocentric majority context (Arday, 2020). Indeed, the wider literature underlines the fact that BAME students feel that institutions rate white and middle-class values more highly than those of other groups (Hammond *et al.*, 2019). The barriers this produces are multi-faceted and combine to create an environment in which students can feel isolated, have less social support and experience discomfort in the university setting; this can lead to poor performance and attrition (Thomas, 2012).

Identity

What is worrying is that some students report feeling they have to mask their identity in order to fit in and to avoid stereotyping, which amplifies their feelings of isolation and also adversely affects confidence and self-esteem (Morrison, Machado and Blackburn, 2019). This is related to a weak sense of belonging, something compounded by lack of diversity in the staff body, where only twelve per cent of academics are BAME (Universities UK, 2019). This study found that lack of representation meant that there were fewer positive role models.

“as in staff they can look up to. If they knew their ethnicity is well represented, they would more likely feel inspired to pursue the same career”

To increase diversity and representation could bring about real changes to how students feel and to the range of role models they are presented with and can aspire to be; it could achieve fundamental shifts in how educational curricula are developed and delivered to meet the needs of, and reflect, social and cultural diversity (Arday, 2020).

Racism

Teaching, learning and assessment processes can further alienate BAME students and there is a consensus across the HE sector globally that curricula are Eurocentric and undermine personal and cultural experience (Bunce *et al.*, 2019). In the SI's work, racism and discrimination were noted as particular barriers to success at university. The student voice in this study highlights a number of issues:

“When these students are coming from communities where English isn't the first language or where there are real cultural barriers to education, you find them dropping out more easily because they just can't cope.”

Here, the student voice is essential in helping us to understand specific challenges faced by BAME students, such as language and cultural differences. These are noted for their deleterious effect on assessment outcomes, when students' personal experience may be negated or misunderstood, as also mentioned in the work of Bunce *et al.* (2019). Such structural racism is often compounded by overt and subtle forms of racism. The literature reflects this, noting that the experience of racism can take the form of direct racist remarks (overt racism), 'harmless jokes' and evident disregard for particular religious and cultural practices (more subtle, but equally harmful forms of racism). Ahmet (2020) refers to racism as much more than individual prejudice and bigotry, but a systemic feature of social structures. Here, the 'white' architecture of the buildings and spaces, reflected in architectural history and the images and artwork on the walls, adds to the sense of

marginalisation already produced by lack of diversity in the student and staff body and creates this feeling of 'otherness' (Ahmet, 2020).

Financial difficulties

This study revealed financial status as a particular barrier to the success of BAME students and noted non-UK students' lack of access to maintenance loans and the consequent need of many to work whilst studying. While many students struggle financially and require employment, this presents a further intersectional challenge for BAME students (Universities UK, 2019) and is yet another reason why some students are prevented from participating fully in university social life and from taking up educational and placement opportunities. The comment below, found in the SI's project, further captures the essence of this point.

“they (academic staff) start asking whether you have done any placements or research. However, that means taking the summer off and working for free, which most BAME students can't afford to do.”

Preparedness for HE is a notable barrier for BAME students, alongside differential access to placement opportunities that help prepare students to gain employment. Here, the SI's work underlines that many students from BAME backgrounds miss out on vital opportunities to build skills for employability and prepare for life beyond university, which further compounds the other forms of disadvantage highlighted in this paper. Here, universities can do more to open opportunities for placement to more diverse groups as well as expand internship opportunities as outlined in this study; these may help to level the playing field.

Addressing inequality is a fundamental responsibility of HE providers and it is here where intersectionality theory is useful in examining the multiple and intersectional challenges faced by under-represented students that combine to produce unequal access and experience (Nichols and Stahl, 2019). In this study, it was apparent that, even when BAME students overcame the hurdles to enter HE, they faced several barriers to success that intersected with race to produce even greater disempowerment (Crenshaw, 1991). What the study also highlights is the need for universities to work in partnership with staff and students – including open consultation and involving those from BAME backgrounds – if they are indeed to understand the challenges currently faced and work together in partnership to address them. Universities should provide opportunities for students and staff to talk, openly and without fear of being judged, about matters relating to race and the voice of all students should be heard, understood and included (Universities UK, 2019).

Impact and evaluation of the internship scheme

The negative impact of COVID-19 on the benefits, outputs and impact of the internship roles for the SIT was significant. The intended local research across other regional universities could not occur; nor could the dissemination of the work across NU and beyond, thus preventing the fulfilment of the aim of having 'students in control' (Bovill and Bulley, 2011). This unexpected change to the scheme's approach did enable the SIT to focus more on the support for and development of the individual interns – or 'student partners' – than on the outputs of the projects themselves, i.e. on the 'process' of engagement, not the product (Healy, Flint and Harrison, 2014). This has enabled the team to reflect critically on the specific purpose of the internship scheme and how future aspiring interns can be better

supported so that they may have an even greater positive influence on behalf of the range of student groups within HE. It is important to acknowledge that, while several of the appointed interns were from the BAME community, only the SI in this study chose to focus research on this group of students.

The study has produced a number of benefits: for the future of the internship scheme, for the SIT's understanding of barriers BAME students face and for awareness of what practical measures may be taken to address these. Already under way are steps 1) to remove identified financial barriers; 2) to overcome those challenges faced by BAME students in progressing out of HE and 3) to raise awareness of employability opportunities. SIT members are currently collaborating on a joint scheme with the NU Graduate Futures Team, which is reviewing the employability fund for WP students and will provide additional financial support to enable future BAME students to engage fully with work-experience-related opportunities. This targeted investment reflects an important shift, in NU as well as in the sector more broadly, to promote skills for employability. COVID-19 is likely to continue affecting employment in the coming years, most notably in terms of younger people and those from BAME backgrounds (Universities UK, 2020). Consequently, it is vital that universities conduct further case studies like this, the better to understand and address the intersectional challenges faced by particular student groups.

The SIT has also ringfenced funding for 2021-2022 and beyond; this will enable existing partnership opportunities (e.g., with NU Students Union) to be further developed. With evaluation of practice, the internships have helped to show the benefits to be gained when students with lived experience engage as partners; also highlighted is the importance of removing, through payment, financial barriers to engagement. The SI's contribution to the SIT has therefore been of significant value in paving the way for what we hope will be a continuing increase in the number of targeted and paid student partnership schemes for students from under-represented groups – in particular, BAME. This will enable NU colleagues to continue engaging and working in partnership with under-represented students to evaluate the inclusivity of our practice and investigate those areas of our work that we had not previously considered exploring – all with the intention of improving student experience and success.

Collective findings make a valuable contribution to the existing BAME literature and provide lecturers, support staff and senior management teams working within HE settings with evidence that may point them to how best to design, implement, manage and evaluate future WP policies and procedures. Outcomes have also informed several other features of work across NU, including the drive towards achieving the Race Equality Charter and the enhancement of the overall culture of equality, diversity and inclusion within the organisation.

Conclusion

This study produced several important outcomes which illustrate clearly the intersectional challenges experienced by BAME university students and highlight specific experiences in NU. Importantly, these outcomes have been used to contribute to the developing and expanding agenda within the organisation and have led to a commitment to explore, understand and respond more effectively to identified barriers to access and success in the HE setting. While this scheme makes only a small contribution to this wider agenda, it does remind us that personal voice provides insight into and understanding of the intersectional

nature of student experience and how that may help to enhance the achievement and employability of all students.

“It is great knowing that the university acknowledges the gaps there are and I am thrilled to see that the Student Inclusion Team was created in an attempt to close them as well.”

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